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*The Relation between the Superintendent
and the School Committee*



By A. W. Anthony

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THE RELATION BETWEEN THE SUPERINTENDENT AND THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE.

A. W. ANTHONY—Member of Lewiston School Committee.

The school committee is the legislative body of the public school system. It lays plans. The superintendent is the executive officer of the school committee. He either executes the plans in person, or sees that they are executed by others. The functions of the two are widely distinct, yet the relation between the two is most intimate and vital. Each is indispensable to the other. Theoretically the school committee has no direct contact with the schools; it has no means of performing its own decrees; for the school committee is not a continuing body. There is no school committee when the committee is not in session. There are individuals who have been elected to serve on a school committee; they are called in common speech "members" of the school committee, or of the school board; but such election and membership gives them no power over the schools or school interests any more than any private citizen enjoys, save only when the committee is in session. As soon as the committee adjourns the members of it are all private citizens like any other private citizens.

I am a member of the school committee of Lewiston, but what authority or power have I over any teacher, or any pupil, or any janitor, or any building belonging to Lewiston's public schools? None whatever, as an individual. The committee, however, has complete authority and power, within the terms of the law, whenever it is in session, and observes the rules of its organization and existence. I may combine in the committee with the other members and have my share of influence; but when I am alone, out of the meeting, away from the others, I have no more power or authority than any other citizen. I have been elected

as a committeeman and nothing else, and the committeeman has no power. It is only the committee which has power. Mark this, and do not forget the distinction.

If you will read the statutes of the State, you will find many things said about the committee, many powers defined, many duties and prerogatives described; but you will not find that the law clothes the single member, as president, chairman, secretary, or private, with any power, any duty, or any prerogative whatever. The committeeman has no legislative functions, save only when he is joined with his associates in duly assembled meeting, and he has no executive functions, save only as they may be prescribed by direct vote for a specific task and for a limited time; for he may be made a special committee, either by himself or with others, for the performance of some special piece of work, and he may have assigned him in the discharge of these clearly prescribed duties, some discretionary power; but the limits of discretion are always fixed, even if they are not precisely stated. By law he can have no power and no right to exercise his discretion, save as the power and right are conferred upon him for a specific task and for a limited period by the committee. The whole committee is the source of authority and power, and it has no right to divest itself of its authority and power, even to some of its own members. It can delegate to its members and even to others the task of executing its wishes, but the committee is the legislative body and it cannot step down and out; its responsibilities are not scattered; they cannot be dissipated, and they cannot be transferred.

One reason why a composite body, like a board, or a committee, has existence only when it is in session becomes apparent, if we recall the fact that a committee is not a mere collection of individuals, but a new social organism, in which each individual, becoming lost himself, acts upon and influences every other individual, some more and some less, but each according to the force of his own personality. An illustration from physics will aid in making plain what I mean. Two forces, moving from different directions and meeting at any angle, other than one of 180 degrees,—when they will be in direct opposition and will nullify each other, if equal,—will not continue as distinct forces, each in its own original direction, but will combine to form a new

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force, moving in a new direction between the two directions previously pursued. Neither survives alone; both are represented in the new resultant force; each contributes its full energy to the new combination.

So with a committee, or any composite body, composed of two or more. Every man on it should give his thought and judgment, his plans and ideals, be they few or many, weak or strong, high or low, to the general decision, and no one member of the committee should expect his view to prevail to the exclusion of the views of the other members of the committee. If one man, be he president, chairman, secretary, or other member, had either the disposition or the power to impose his view upon the whole committee, then the committee might just as well cease to be, for that man would be the committee. When Smith, Jones and Brown unite in a committee, then the deeds of the committee and the report of the committee should represent neither Smith, Jones nor Brown singly, but all of them collectively and be a joint product to which neither would put his name singly, but which fairly represents them all as a committee. No committee can reach its own modified and composite and representative conclusions unless it meets in open session, with every member present and every member exerting his full influence in the free expression of his honest opinion and convictions.

What I have thus far said is, I am satisfied, not only good law, but also good common sense for a people who love the principles of democracy. It were well, if all members of our American city governments remembered that they were mere private citizens when the government itself was not in session, and if all legislators understood that when the legislature was not in session, they themselves were mere private citizens. The legislative chamber is not the executive officer; and the legislative chamber has no existence, save when it is in session, according to the laws, or the rules, governing it, with its quorum, ready as a body to deliberate and act. This fact is so important that it cannot be too strongly stated and emphasized. The board is the board, and no one else, nothing else, can take its place.

The superintendent is elected by the board, and the statutes prescribe that he shall be elected annually, excepting in the case

of a union of towns, supporting one superintendent, in which case he may be elected for a period of not more than five years. The superintendent is, according to statute, the secretary of the school committee; he must attend all meetings, he may speak upon the subjects under consideration, but he cannot vote. He is the executive officer of the committee. When the committee adjourns, there is no committee; its members are all private citizens; but adjournment does not affect the superintendent. He is superintendent still. Indeed, he is more of a superintendent when the committee is not in session. As the committee lays aside its powers and prerogatives, the superintendent takes them up. He is permanent; he executes what the committee has decreed; he acts for the committee, speaks for the committee, represents the committee, when the committee is not in session. He is not the committee, for he cannot deliberate and decide for the committee. He is not a legislative officer at all; he is purely executive. If he exercises his judgment and discretion in any matters, it is because by the laws of the State, or by the rules, or the votes of the committee he is authorized so to do, upon certain specified matters. But he is an executive pure and simple, it is his duty to execute the decisions of the committee where they have been expressed by duly registered votes and entered upon the records. He has no right to take directions from any individual member of the committee, president or other person, for an individual member has no right to give directions in regard to any matter pertaining to the schools. The superintendent has no right to go around to member after member of the committee, even if he goes to them all, and receive from each one the same reply, and get instructions which shall govern his actions. Even all the members of the committee individually do not constitute the committee. The committee is a committee only when it is in session; and only when it is in session should the superintendent consult the committee and seek instructions.

That the committee is the deliberate body and the superintendent the executive officer, is made plain in the laws of the State. The committee may elect, or appoint the teachers and fix their compensation; but the superintendent employs them. The committee determines upon erecting or reconstructing buildings,

but it may entrust to the superintendent, or to a special committee, the power and the duty of carrying out its plans. The committee must determine whether the necessity of conveying pupils exists, but the superintendent procures conveyance, when it has been decided upon. In the supervision of teachers and in the treatment of pupils, as to admission, promotion, and discipline, the superintendent may have powers conferred upon him by the statutes, but it is always in conjunction with the committee.

It is well for the committee to remember that, if it decides to buy so much coal of such a dealer at such a price, yet after all it is the superintendent who should do the actual purchasing. He is the agent of the board for the performance of all the tasks in the sphere of school administration, which the committee may decree. The committee is not a business body; the superintendent is its business agent. The committee is not an administrative body, the superintendent is its administrative agent. The committee is not elected to do, but to decree. The superintendent is not appointed to decree, but to do. The committeemen are to do something else for their living; the superintendent is to do nothing else for his living. Being on the committee is a mere incident with the committeeman; he does not give all his time to it. Being superintendent is the one and only thing with the superintendent; he should give all his time to it, and have no other business concerns or professional cares.

The committeeman is supposed to be elected because of his impartiality in public spirit, and his judicial turn of mind, which will enable him to pass sound judgment upon a great variety of questions which may arise pertaining to the public schools, questions of construction, repairs, sanitation, heating, ventilation, fire escapes, health, seating,—questions pertaining to courses of study, text-books, matters of discipline, rewards, prizes, diplomas, exercises; the selection and pay of teachers, janitors, truant officers, prescribing their duties and privileges;—and a multitude of important and oftentimes perplexing matters. The superintendent is selected because he is regarded as an expert in all these matters; by training and experience he is looked upon as having accumulated a mass of technical knowledge concerning all these important educational subjects, about which even the best of the school committeemen may know little or nothing.

Yet, notwithstanding all his technical knowledge the superintendent is not put in control of the schools. He is still the agent of the committee. He may instruct the committee; he should; he may impart information; he should; he should make recommendations and bring all of his superior knowledge and expert training to the service of the schools and to the assistance of the committee, yet he is not to supersede the committee; he is still the committee's agent, and must take his orders from the committee. But a committee with an intelligent superintendent, if itself intelligent, will quickly trust its superintendent and avail itself of his technical knowledge and expert qualifications. Then will result the ideal situation,—of a committee, broad-minded, judicial, public spirited, serving as a deliberate body to pass upon questions of school administration, often on recommendation of the superintendent, always after consultation with him, and in harmony with his known wishes; and a superintendent, qualified as a real educator both in pedagogical principles and practice, both in the theory and administration of schools, whose sole interests are the schools under his charge, whose greatest ambition is the welfare and complete development of the children committed to his care, whose judgment is impartial, whose zeal is alert, whose character and ideals are themselves an inspiration; and then should follow schools which should supplement the best of homes and prepare the children of the community for the best of living.

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